

NON-FICTION

Nanu

JULIE REZA

The first time I saw my nanu was when I was seven years old. Actually, strictly speaking that's not true. The first time I saw my nanu was when I was born, topsy-turvy (or what is known in medical terms as 'breech'), into this world. There she was at the end of my long, bendy legs, smile on her face and a clean white katha in her hands. Of course I don't remember that time, but I'm sure I must have looked at her adoringly with my pale, not-quite-yet-able-to-focus eyes.

Nanu was the first to do everything for me; the first to touch a spoonful of honey to my lips to make me sweet-tempered. She was the first to bathe me (in warm water, with an added drop of glycerine and coconut oil), and the first to dress me in a soft, pink, muslin dress with a tiny chain-stitched flower and bird hand-embroidered on the bodice.

At several months old, when my hair was due to be shaved, Nanu was the one who first touched my head so gently with the blade (before passing it over to the much better-practiced naftih); when my little curls re-appeared, she was the one that would encourage their formation with a drop or two of her precious joba-kushom oil. And when the time came to satisfy my texture-curious lips and tongue, it was Nanu who prepared the milky firni for me, and Nanu who persuaded me to take my first taste of this strange new substance.

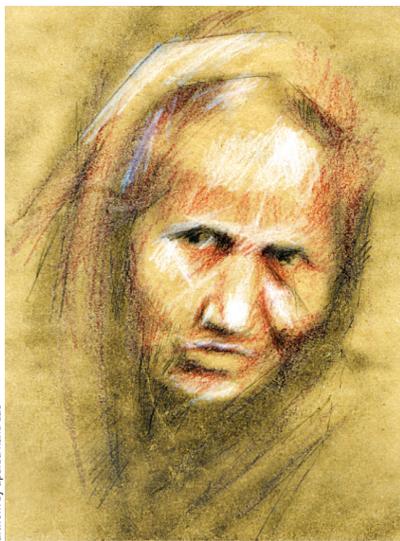
Of course, I don't really have memories of Nanu from back then - my family and I went away to London when I was still a baby. Still, all these years later my mother and aunt are wonderful at reminiscing about those days, and always remind me of the loving things that Nanu did.

As a young child over here in England, I hadn't really been aware of who Nanu was. Oh, I'd heard of her: I was a fussy eater, and recall that my mother would persuade me to eat my food by rolling the rice onto small balls and telling me that these were 'Nanu's dims and Dadu's dims'. Who were these strange people that my mother always referred to? I couldn't really picture them (though I must confess that for a little while I had them confused with a picture of *hathi-math-tim*, for didn't the illustration in my nursery rhyme book show how they 'mathe pare dim'?!)

During our early childhood, thoughts of our nanu hardly entered our lives. I knew that now-and-again little blue aerogrammes would be placed in my mum's hands that would fill my mum with joy. The address written on the front and back was in a determined but shaky hand, the writing was like mine, not quite staying on the line; on every aerogramme, the phrase 'London, UK' was always written as 'LondonUK', as if someone had painstakingly copied every detail of it from the same carelessly written source. If I looked inside these aerogrammes, even when I was old enough to read (English), they were always filled with hieroglyphics that only my parents could read. Of course, I now know these hieroglyphics were just Bangla! But to me, in those days, the hieroglyphics were magical - for they had the power to make my mother laugh, cry or smile, all in the space of a few minutes.

As we grew up, every new year we would line up by the telephone while my dad booked the trunk call back home -- then we'd wait for what seemed like an eternity for the operator to call us back and tell us we had got a line. And then we would be pushed forward to mechanically repeat: 'Nanu, Apne kemon achen? Amra balo achi. Ami class (and here we would insert a relevant year)-te portesi. Nana-bhai ke salaam diben. Dua korben'. A lady would twitter away on the other end of the line, but the line was never very good and our Bangla not quite up to deciphering the stream of unfamiliar words and phrases.

So, as I was saying, I first laid eyes on Nanu at Dhaka airport when I was seven. She was this tiny, Kohl-eyed lady with *shupari*-coloured red lips, salt-and-pepper hair, and a slightly wrinkly face; she wore a very pale, freshly starched and ironed yellow cotton sari with a tiny green border, and delicate open-toed sandals. When I first saw her, her hands were eagerly pressed up against the security glass and she had a broad smile on her face. And then tears streamed down her eyes as she bent down and held us to her faintly-jasmine-scented chest with gentle force, as if she would never let us go again. I guess, at the time, and in the hustle and bustle of the airport crowds, we weren't too worried about being so snug up against her protective sari.



artwork by apurba kanti das

At home she got the maids to bring some ice cold water and, soaking the end of her sari in the water, she bathed our heat-drenched foreheads. Then, for the rest of our stay, she did what I'm convinced all nanus do all the time. She fed and watered us. Her speciality was a fuchsia pink, rose-scented syrup drink that tasted of molten Turkish delight. And to accompany this there would be a never-ending stream of *nimkis*, mango slices, *pawpaw* cubes, *samosas*, *shingoras* and *badaams*. All eagerly received, of course!

Town Nanu was immensely both indulgent and protective of us. But it was only when we went to the village home that we got the full onslaught of Nanu's 'Display of Love-Through-Food'. From huge, mysterious, greenish-glass bottles, some in the kitchen, some behind the almirah, some locked away in the display case, some floating in a bowl of ice, she would bring out an endless feast. There would be *narikelis*: rolled up little balls of puffed rice and moist coconut, mixed with sweet-smelling molasses. Or freshly made

jelabis, twisted and turned into spirals of pure orange-coloured delight (these were the days before the advent of the food-colouring police, who have caused modern *jelabis* to look poor, insipid copies of those royal delights). Sometimes a sticky piece of pineapple or mango *murroga* would be placed in my willing, greedy hands.

We used to sit and make things with Nanu. I spent days folding little scraps of fabric from Nanu's dress-making box into triangles, all to be sewn together, like little leaves, into a circular tablecloth. At other times we would sit and weave strips of palm leaves into tiny mats for the table or floor. Sometimes Nanu would help us cut these into circles, mount them on a piece of cane with strips of fabric, add a slice of hollowed bamboo at the bottom, and make our own little cooling device -- the hand-held *pankha*.

My Nanu wasn't without her own little peculiarities. I'm sure, if you think about it, your nanu had ones too. Nanu never touched money. That's not to say she never handled money; it's just that if she did, she always did so with the corner of her sari or some other piece of fabric. The notes were held at arm's length with some distaste. Coins were always placed on a table -- never directly into someone's hands.

Nanu never used to make her own phone calls. She would call you over and you would have to dial the numbers. (I'm ashamed to say only recently did it dawn on me that the reason Nanu didn't make calls herself was not because of some technophobia; it was, of course, because she didn't know English numbers). The funniest thing was, once the call was made, Nanu would talk while covering her mouth with the end of her (multi-functional) sari - lest the person that she was talking saw her slightly wonky front tooth up close!

Over the years Nanu's affection for us never faltered. On each trip back we'd receive the same, firm hug and we'd be given something that she'd bought for us while we were away. Often it was a new outfit, sometimes it was delicate glass

bangles, a handbag or a pretty pair of sandals. When I turned eighteen -- and had my much-belated akika -- she presented me with beautiful, long, nai-rathan earrings. As she handed them over to me, she laughingly gurgled to herself, again covering her face with her sari. 'You can wear these when you're married', she chuckled! On every visit since then a new item of jewellery was added to my ever-increasing treasure chest.

The years passed and with each visit we noticed how Nanu seemed to be getting frailer, even smaller (though was that because we were getting taller?). More wrinkles had formed on her face, her hair got greyer. After Nana passed away we went back to find her in starched white, bare of all jewellery except a thin bangle. But her jolly soul had lost none of its zest for life.

We learnt about Nanu's life as a child. Her grandfather had been a famous and wealthy poet, as had been her father. She had been brought up in a life of luxury, surrounded by laughter and music, and adored by four younger brothers. Getting married to my Nana-bhai and moving away to the town house from all the fun and frolics of the big city had been quite a change for her. My Nana-bhai, though a kindly man, was orphaned when young and led an austere, quiet life, part in the town, the rest in the village home. The women in the town were fiercely protective of Nanu, and those in the village wouldn't leave her side. They entertained her with songs and dances all of their own, and she built close attachments with them all -- always asking and caring about their life and troubles, keeping up-to-date with births, marriages and deaths in their families.

Nanu's knowledge of such matters never failed to astonish me. When it came to talking about our own relations, Nanu also had an encyclopaedic knowledge. Like all Deshis, we were all related to one another in many ways, but somehow Nanu kept abreast of all of that -- keeping in her head what I would need a complex spreadsheet to keep up with. Even when her eyesight was failing, as soon as someone new was introduced to her she would amaze them (and us) by rubbing her eyes, squinting, and then exclaiming: 'Your so-and-so's boy or girl, aren't you?'

Nanu may have looked mild and gentle,

but as is often found in ladies of her generation she had gritty determination, supreme inner strength and quite an iron will. I will never forget one night when we were woken up to be told that Nanu was unwell. We rushed to her bedside to see her starting to fade away in front of us. Her pulse had gone, she didn't breathe. In panic we tried to resuscitate her and, by some miracle, she revived. Elated to have her back but concerned for her health, we wanted to take her to the clinic. But Nanu, like others of her generation, had a morbid fear of hospitals. 'No, no, I will never go!' she screamed at us. And somehow, despite having only just escaped the jaws of death, she managed to physically fight us off -- four tall, healthy, fit adults!

Three years ago I saw my nanu for the last time. The nanu of fun, mischief and merrymaking had gone; the sparkle had gone from her eyes. On a visit to the village home -- a visit that she had enjoyed immensely -- she had fallen and irreparably broken her leg. She was forced to lie on the bed night and day, in pain and totally reliant on others. Her frail heart was not so strong, so the doctors couldn't operate to fix her up. It was heartbreaking to see her like that. How much a life alters before your eyes.

Later that same year Nanu passed away. Her death has left a whole in our home and in our heart. But, you know what? Her happy laughter hasn't left us. I still hear it each time I look at my earrings, every time I look at her photo, whenever I sit to sew or make something. I even recall Nanu's smiling face at unexpected moments. So today, as I wandered through the Indian aisles of the supermarket doing my weekly shopping, I heard Nanu giggle again as I found they were selling little bottles of rose-flavoured pink syrup. Just like my nanu's.

Julie Reza is a doctor in the UK.

Talking with India's premier literary agent

Writing, publishing and selling books today is a complex affair increasingly ordered by the corporate world and its rules, which can flummox even established writers, never mind beginners. Literary agents have necessarily been born out of this complexity, and as the Indian, indeed the South Asian, book business modernizes, literary agents and agencies have emerged. Below The Daily Star's **Ahmede Hussain** talked with **Jayapriya Vasudevan**, who founded and currently runs Jacaranda Press, India's first and premier literary agency. There are several operating now, but she was the first.

Every English language Bangladeshi writer, and would-be writer, would be wise to carefully listen to what she is saying.

Ahmede Husain: We know that you were the first literary agent to set up the business in South Asia. Could you tell your readers a bit about the work it does?

Jayapriya Vasudevan: Jacaranda is India's first literary agency. We started in 1997 with a handful of books, and a dream to work with new writing. Ten years down the line, while we have worked with only a select list of books, we continue to seek and promote new writers and have grown from a national company into representing authors internationally as well, through our association with The Marsh Agency in the UK. We represent a list of authors from India and China, and have also received queries from the US, the UK and even Australia. Our Chinese list is small but interesting. Mostly non-fiction, with two works of fiction. Like any agency, we evaluate books, present them to appropriate publishers, negotiate contracts. The culture of using an agent is non-existent in this part of the world. It's taken us a while to get where we are. We are extremely proud to have had Anita Nair and Shashi Warrier from the time we began. In addition to the work at the agency, we also work in the area of promoting writing and the arts, through Writers' Block, our festival of writing. These have been held in Bangalore, Mumbai and Beijing. The next festival will be in Singapore. This is a very informal forum for writers to meet their readers. We work with a mix of writers from all over India, work with writers with translations, across different genres, with a mix of the arts (music and poetry, dance, theatre).



that the manuscript is sent to us, based on our submission guidelines. We list submission details on our website: www.jacaranda-press.com. Our team of editors reviews each book that comes to us. If the editor is unsure about the book, a second editor reads it, and we finally discuss possibilities as a team. The book needs to grab our attention - to stand out - to speak to us... I personally look for good 'people' in manuscripts. That's my hook I guess. For representation, we just look for something that appeals. There are no rules. It's really an instinct that makes us take authors on. I do truly believe that good writing will sell, no matter how or when. It just will.

AH: Of the young writers of South Asian descent will you name one or two writers whom you really liked?
JV: Anita Nair is a special favourite from India. Her new book *Mistress* remains one of my all time best books. I have been reading a great deal of Chinese and Japanese fiction recently. I must also admit to thoroughly enjoying Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*! I am now reading *A Golden Age* by Tahmima Anam. I run a book club and we are reading this book in two months. I do a prelim reading. I do like what I have read so far and I think I would like to read more authors who

AH: There has been a flow of South Asian fiction into the world's literary scene lately. In the manuscripts you get, what do you look for before you decide to represent a writer?
JV: We get several submissions every week, and we do guarantee that each manuscript gets a fair reading. We prefer

live in Bangladesh rather than those who live away. My sentiments are the same for Indian writing. Indian India rather than UK or US India.

AH: What is your next project about?

JV: Our latest project is *Let's Kill Gandhi*, by Tushar A Gandhi. Published in English by Rupa and Co, it was released on the 30th of January of this year in Delhi (on the anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination). The book is already in its second print run, and scheduled to go into its third reprint. Tushar's sensational book on his great-grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi, retraces the steps of his assassination, giving a detailed account of the murder, in a milieu that is both political and religious. Very few people are aware that there were several failed attempts. Tushar believes that the police, intelligentsia and politicians of the day had information on all the attempts, including that of the actual assassination, but did nothing to prevent them, thus conveniently placing the Mahatma in the line of fire. The religious fundamentalism and political wrangling that led up to the partition of India is mirrored in today's world. Gandhi died for a cause. He once said 'An eye for an eye ends up making the whole world blind.'

Tushar uses the book to underscore the need to learn from history, and look at life with the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence.

Future projects include more non-fiction - an autobiography, a cookbook and two business-related books. There are a few titles in fiction as well. *Black Tongue* by Anjana Basu (we represent her in the UK only) is just out. Shashi Warrier's *Kashmir* will be out this year. As will a book on an honest look at the call centre industry, from our non-fiction list. As you can see, it's a mix of fiction and non-fiction, of Indian writers and Chinese writers (I lived in Beijing for a few years). We do very little children's writing. We did an anthology for teenagers in China late last year. We, however, do not work with poetry.

Rabindranath's Shey: Hearing Hamlet

KHADEMUL ISLAM

In his fluent introduction to this translation of *Shey* by Rabindranath, Shankha Ghosh writes that in his diary entry of 15 February 1925, Rabindranath wrote that "Last night, I had finished dinner and was sitting in my cabin. I was commanded: 'Dadamashai, tell me a story about tigers...'. So I began --

A tiger of the stripy kind
A mirror chanced to view,
And seeing the black upon his coat
Into a temper flew.
He thought the matter urgent --
So to find a good detergent,
Bade Jhagru post to Prague
Or else Hazaribagh."

So at the 'command' of his nine-year-old granddaughter Pupe, or Nandini, was born the rhyme about a tiger. It led eventually to *Shey*, to what Shankha Ghosh terms as "a fantasy in fourteen chapters." The remarkable thing about the translator Apurba Chaudhuri is that she is in her final year at Calcutta Girls' High School; she read *Shey* when she was ten (approximately Pupuddi's age when she listened to Dadamashai's first installment), and began the translation soon afterwards -- "the first draft contained more doodles than writing." Now, at about the same age as Pupe was -- 16 years - when the original volume was published in 1937, she has published her own translation of the tales. For somebody still in high school Apurba is startlingly mature about the art of translation, writing that aside from the usual agonies of rendering into English "the colloquial language, the frequent play on words, the caricatures of the heroes and deities of Indian mythology," the central problem posed in translating *Shey* was the rendering of this particular 'He' -- a Bengali third person pronoun - 'who helps the writer to make up the story' and in the process "becomes the story's most integral element."

These stories enchant, and part of the enchantment is that those very stories simultaneously illuminate the process of story-telling. Rabindranath was way ahead of the vaunted 'unreliable narrator' of modernist creations, while the result of Apurba's efforts is something far beyond her years, readable and liberating.

The Bengali bourgeoisie has buried Rabindranath in its bardolatry. Sukanta Chaudhuri (general editor of the Oxford Tagore translation series) said as much once in his 'View from Calcutta' newspaper column, writing that "a certain refinement of sentiment and utterance, the classicizing of certain features of the Bengali landscape, a certain vein of exalted romanticism," perpetuates an "elite, effete Tagore tradition," that like "dentist's ether, de-fangs" Rabindranath. Forgotten are, Sukanta observed, Rabindranath's "prose writings on politics and society that, beneath a superficial datedness, still reach out like a whiplash to touch the Bengali psyche," neglected are "works (where) you will read, as in a prophecy, searing analyses of how the city (Calcutta) and society view and conduct themselves to this day."

So too in *Shey*, ostensibly written for children, Rabindranath rips through the conventions- the shastras -- laid down for this form. The result is something rich and strange. Rabindranath mocks academic pedantry, parries with the Bengali modernists -- the 'He' tells Pupuddi's Dadamashai, "You see, Dada, this is your way of telling stories. Instead of tracing them out clearly and simply with your forefinger,

you write them out in exaggerated curves and flourishes, as if you had Lord Ganesh's trunk for a pen. You must twist the familiar into the strange. It's very easy. People might laugh when you say the viceroy's set up trade in oil and is selling dried fish at Bagbazar, but the laughter you win by a cheap joke like that is of no worth." One can hear Hamlet here, addressing the Players: "But it was as I received it...an excellent play, well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning. I remember one said there were no sallies in the lines to make the matter savoury, nor no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affection, but called it an honest method, as wholesome as sweet..."

And this is barely the beginning! In his own inimitable way Rabindranath rails against the tuneless and the discordant, urges overbred Bengal to break the 'gentlemanly cut' of poetry, beat out the backbone of verses with clubs. Angry at a caste-ridden society, he chases it by very funnily describing the tribulations of a caste-conscious tiger! In this children's book, he displays what Lila Majumdar called "biting satire underneath the evident humour." Then, Prospero-like, there is meditation, too, on his own art, on how to step away 'directionless/in baul's dress' and be a 'worthless flower among weeds' - with even a kind of a Bengali Ariel in the guise of Sukumar, a character who gradually begins to make an



Modern Classics
Rabindranath Tagore
He (Shey)

appearance in place of 'He'.

I finished the book in a kind of dazzled wonderment: had Rabindranath been alive today, would he have shunned the 'gentlemanly cut' of all the elegant columns and words written about him on 'Baishay Srabon' and 'Pochishay Boishakh'? Would he himself have looked at our continual "elite, effete" reproduction of the Tagorean tradition and invented a new tiger rhyme, written a new *Shey*? What would he have said about, say, 1971 and our constructions of nationalism? Would he have 'seared' Dhaka, too, revolted by the degradations caused by class and poverty? Would he have *liked* us as we are now?

Your stomachs you stuff
With more than enough,
In your pockets you stash
Your bundles of cash,
But add up the due,
You'll find that it's true
That of your reserve,
The orphans deserve
The larger share,
And love and fond care.
So arise and awake
For the orphan's sake.
O, give to the poor, help lessen their pain--
O, give to the poor and give once again!

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

How Happily Once...

(Translated by Fakrul Alam)

How happily once we village youths
Would spend our days, Hindus and Muslims,
Singing Baul and Ghetu songs all together!

The monsoons were the time of Ghazi songs
Sung joyously, colorfully, delighting everyone.
Baul and Ghetu songs created a torrent of delight.
Shari songs on our lips we'd race our boats then.

Hindu households would stage jatra plays
We'd be invited, and we'd love to attend.
Who cared about politics or got worked up
About being a member or an elected official?

In disputes, us poor and needy folks
Would seek and find justice in panchayat courts.
People were simple and happy in their beliefs
Now everyone crazily chases dreams of riches!

I keep thinking: we'll never be happy like then.
Though I once believed happiness was forever.
Day by day things get worse and worse
Which path will distraught Karim now follow?

Translator's note: The above translation is based on a song which is part of a collection of songs by various bands and singers of Bangladesh titled simply *Baul Shah Abdul Karim*. It is a collection that I highly recommend to all music lovers. It should be added that Shah Abdul Karim (1916-) is a Baul from Sylhet and in my opinion a wonderful lyricist and composer who has at least 1500 songs to his credit. He received the Ekushey Padak in 2001.

Fakrul Alam is professor of English at Dhaka University.

NOTICE

The Literature Page of The Daily Star will bring out a **Special Eid issue** of English translations of Bengali short stories. All translators, as well would-be translators, who have wanted to be published in a reputed publication, all those who have a favourite Bengali story/s they think ought to be translated should submit their entries.

We are looking for stories that depict contemporary life in Bangladesh, by younger, edgier authors who otherwise tend to be given short shrift in standard translation anthologies and collections, as well as the lesser known of short stories written by our classical authors. The short stories ideally should not be more than 3000-3500 words, and first-time translators should be aware that it is extremely taxing to translate stories beyond that length. The translations, along with a copy of the Bangla original (if a photostat, then the reproduction should be clear and legible) should be sent to:

The Literary Editor
The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka -1215
Email: starlit@thedaily.com.net

Entries should be clearly marked
"For Translation Eid Special."
The last date for submissions is August 24.

Separately, the last date for submission of articles for The Daily Star nonfiction anthology has been extended to October 30, 2007.